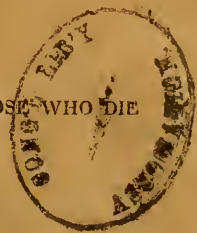


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THE CHARACTER AND BLESSEDNESS OF THOSE WHO DIE
IN THE LORD.



A

SERMON,

DELIVERED AT ACTON, DEC. 14, 1812.

AT THE

FUNERAL OF MRS. ABIGAIL ADAMS,

WIFE OF THE

REV. MOSES ADAMS,

OF THAT TOWN.

BY EZRA RIPLEY,

PASTOR OF THE CHURCH IN CONCORD.

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And I heard a voice from heaven, saying unto me, Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth : Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours ; and their works do follow them.

THE richest consolations to afflicted man, are derived from the invisible world. In the present state, troubles spring up in every place, in every condition ; but in the future, sorrow and sighing will forever cease : thence, therefore, are drawn not only his chief, but, sometimes, his only joys. Supported by *these*, which the believing mind discerns, the pious heart partially enjoys, and the gospel hope anticipates in perfection, the living and dying christian is enabled to endure trials with patience, encounter death with courage, and triumph over every enemy to his peace and salvation.

The blessed Author of our being perfectly knows our frame, and remembers that we are dust. His compassion to his suffering children is wonderful. He pities their weakness, while he chastises their faults, and causes heaven to shine upon their souls, while he destroys their earthly hopes. Since they

must conflict with the billows of sorrow in this state of probation, and at the close of it with the king of terrors, he graciously condescends to assure them of his constant care, his everlasting love, and the certainty of blessedness beyond the grave. And this he does by a particular voice from heaven, in addition to the general language and previous promises of revelation. Our text is a remarkable instance. St. John was commanded to write what the voice from heaven uttered, viz. "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth." As if to confirm this voice beyond the possibility of doubt, the attestation of the Spirit is added, the Spirit of inspiration, of prophecy, of God : "Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours ; and their works do follow them."

I shall not, at this time, inquire into the primary design and application of this passage. There is evidently a general design and application to all persons of the same character, those who die in the Lord, whether by natural death in a time of peace, or a violent death in a time of persecution. This character is pronounced blessed in whatever period or part of the world it is found. The blessedness commences at death, "from henceforth." This construction appears to me the most pertinent. Immediately on departing from this life, real christians are in a blessed state. How full of comfort this comprehensive thought ! The moment we feel all the grief and anguish of separation from christian relatives and friends, we hear the joyful proclamation from heaven, "Blessed are the dead." This illustrates the declaration that, "As a father pitieth his children, so-the

Lord pitieth them that fear him.” The goodness and compassion of God mitigate the unavoidable distresses of the godly as far as the nature of things and the perfection of the divine government will admit.

Our text evidently favours the opinion, that departed christians are immediately received to paradise, to a state of blessedness. On this supposition I shall discourse, without examining different opinions on the state of the dead. I shall attempt to show what is meant by dying in the Lord, and the moral character requisite to such a death; consider the blessedness intended in the text, and in what it consists; and make application.

First. I am to show what is meant by dying in the Lord, and the moral character requisite to such a death. To die in the Lord, is, to die in the faith, the fear, the love, and the favour of God in Christ. Here I have reference especially to those who enjoy the gospel. Saints in the ancient Jewish church could only believe in the Messiah to come. Saints among the heathen are ignorant of the mediation and atonement of Jesus Christ. If, however, they believe in God, reverence and love his character, and work righteousness, they are accepted and blessed.

Belief in the being, perfections, government, providence, and grace of God is essential. “For he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is the rewarder of them that diligently seek him; but without (such a) faith it is impossible to please God.” This faith, in respect to those enlightened by the gospel, must also have Jesus Christ for its object: it must view him and rely on him as the Son of God, the only Saviour of sinners, as the way, the

truth, and the life. Here is sure ground for peace and comfort. "Let not your heart be troubled," said our Lord to his disciples, "ye believe in God, believe also in me." But this faith must be operative ; it must direct the powers of the mind and the affections of the heart towards God and divine things ; it must purify the heart, overcome the world, work by love, and produce universal piety to God and goodness to men.

Religious *fear* accompanies such an operative faith. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." By this fear is meant a reverential awe of the infinite God, of his perfections and character ; a holy fear of offending him, and a pious carefulness to honour all his name. This fear is not terrifying and slavish, but filial and affectionate. *Love*, therefore, is essential. God must have the supreme affection of the heart, agreeably to the first and great command, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart," &c. Love is the greatest and the most important of all the christian graces, without which we are nothing in religion, whatever may be our pretensions. To such faith, fear, and love, as briefly described, the *favour* of God is inseparably connected. Persons possessing such a character are reconciled to God, are renewed and sanctified, and, on the plan of the gospel, are objects of the divine favour and complacency. Nothing can separate them from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord ; and when they leave this world, they die in the Lord, they fall asleep in Jesus Christ, in a sure and certain hope of a glorious resurrection and blessed immortality.

The moral character requisite to dying in the Lord is nearly explained. It is a religious character according to the gospel of Christ. The principles of faith, fear, and love, above-mentioned, put into practice, include all the dispositions, and all the duties of piety to God, obedience to Christ, righteousness and charity to men, and personal sobriety and temperance ; they include a heart supremely devoted to God, an inviolable attachment to Christ and his cause in the world, the same mind that was in him, the same kind of love to neighbours as for one's self, and a faithful discharge of the various duties of life, according to the stations assigned by Providence. Here is manifest the person who walks humbly with God, who does justly and loves mercy, who confesses and forsakes all sin, who is created anew in Christ, who embraces the hope of the gospel, admires and follows the Saviour, trusts in his atonement and relies on the mercy of God for pardon and acceptance, and perseveres to the end of life increasing in heavenly mindedness and practical holiness, as the lapse of months and years hastens the time of departure. This moral character substantially is requisite to dying in the Lord ; and they who possess it are happily prepared to leave this world, and are qualified to enjoy the blessedness spoken of in the text.

However some persons may be suddenly prepared for death and heaven, and in a manner extraordinary, these are cases out of the ordinary course of divine operation, on which, therefore, we have no warrant to depend. We ought to look for repentance towards God, unto reformation, and faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ, unto obedience, a new heart and

holy life, as sure preparation for dying in the Lord and the blessedness promised by the voice from heaven.

Secondly. I am to consider the blessedness promised, rather pronounced, in the text, and in what it consists. Whenever this subject comes before us, we feel the weakness of our powers. Our minds are unable to comprehend it, and our language fails to express our thoughts. We are constrained to adopt the language of the apostle, "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man the things which God hath prepared for them that love him." Nevertheless, since God has revealed them to us, by his Spirit, in some degree, and the inspired writers have used many expressions to give us some ideas of the joys and glories of heaven, especially as to their kind, we may endeavour by those helps to enlighten our faint ideas, and warm our hearts on a subject confessedly incomprehensible.

That they may rest from their labours. This is the first idea given in the blessedness of the dead ;—*rest* from their labours of service, of sorrow, of pain, of trouble, of sin. The body rests quietly in the grave, and the soul actually happy in paradise. How pure, perfect, and satisfying must be the rest of the saints after all the toils and labours, sorrows and sufferings, temptations and conflicts of this world of service and trial ! What racking pains, wearisome days, and nights, and months, and inexpressible distress are allotted to some ! From all this labour, and from every kind and degree of sorrow and anxiety, christians rest at death. It appears to me consistent with the scriptures to suppose, that guardian angels are sent to

minister to these heirs of salvation ; that, invisible to us, they attend their dying bed, and kindly escort their departing spirit to the regions of rest, light, and glory. Blessed be God, there remaineth a rest, glorious and heavenly, for all his people !

And their works do follow them. Something more positive, sublime, and extensive is here intended. The memory of their good works lives after they are gone to rest. “The memory of the just is blessed.” Near relatives and friends especially will remember the good works of departed saints ; and many will carefully imitate their good example, while they love and cherish their memory. Many who have known poverty and affliction, sickness and distress, will remember the kind visits, the timely assistance, the charitable hand, and the consoling counsels of departed benefactors. In this, there is some reward. Notwithstanding this, it is rather humiliating to think how soon the goodness, and even the memory of the excellent of the earth will be forgotten. It now seems to us, *we* never shall forget the goodness or lose the memory of our deceased relative and friend. But the next generation will think and feel very differently. This, however, is not strange nor much to be reprehended. It evinces imperfection rather than criminality.

The effects of the good works of christians will follow them longer, perhaps, than the memory of them. We are, doubtless, often actuated by the precepts and examples of persons of whom we are wholly ignorant. Impressions have been made on our minds at times we cannot recollect, and lessons have been transmitted by means we cannot trace. It is a serious con-

sideration, joyous only to the pious, that what we say and do may affect generations yet unborn. And it is a part of the reward of the righteous, to know that the happy effects of their good works may bless thousands, when they shall be numbered with the dead, and, perhaps, long forgotten. This thought is adapted to stimulate the godly to abound in practical goodness, and to deter the wicked from doing evil.

But the principal idea in the following of works, is, the reward of the good works of christians will follow them beyond the grave and to endless duration. Not for their works, but according to their works God will graciously reward those who die in the Lord. All their piety and goodness, their kindness and charity, their fidelity and zeal, their suffering and submission in obedience to divine authority and the example of Christ, God will remember and reward of his boundless grace and mercy in Jesus Christ. When our Lord speaks of the final judgment, he pronounces blessed and invites to a kingdom those who had fed the hungry, clothed the naked, visited the sick, the prisoner, and treated with kindness the stranger. The performance of these relative duties evinces their inward piety and goodness, their renovation, and their qualification for heaven; but the reward is of grace, and it infinitely transcends the goodness of their works, to perform which is their indispensable duty.

But in what will the glorious and eternal reward of the saints consist? As observed above, we are unable to describe or conceive the things that God has prepared for them that love him, except faintly from what is revealed. We are warranted to say, the

saints in heaven are perfect in *knowledge*. In this life, they see but in part, and know but in part. But in heaven, they see as they are seen, and know as they are known. They are able to search, understand, and comprehend the wonderful works, the mysterious ways, and the glorious grace of God, and with powers to investigate, apprehend, and enjoy, they increase without end. What unspeakable happiness, we may suppose, the lovers of knowledge find in their glorified state !

They are perfect in *holiness*. No sin, no imperfection, no temptation, no danger of sinning interrupts their ineffable joy. They resemble the Deity in holiness ; that is, they are perfectly holy in their measure and nature, as saints. This state to the soul that longs to be perfectly holy must be joyous beyond all our present conceptions.

They are also perfect in *love*. Perfection in love admits of no alloy. Perfect love casteth out fear. We have no adequate idea of such a state. Here imperfection darkens every prospect, mars every joy, chills holy aspirations, mingles painful fears with heavenly affections, and oppresses, more or less, the purest soul. But in heaven this burden is not felt, and the complacency, the delight, and the enjoyment of the saints are infinite.

Reason and revelation encourage the belief, that departed saints recognize all their pious and holy relatives and friends, who have gone to heaven before them ; and that all the saints feel a union to each other that is ineffably joyous and delightful. But leaving an opinion that may be disputed, however

pleasant, I will take ground that admits of no controversy.

They are like angels. "For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven." Though we may rationally conclude, that the happiness and glory of the saints will be increased in *degree*, at the resurrection of the body, yet there is no reason to suppose, that the *kind* of enjoyment will be different. Their happiness in paradise, in the intermediate state is pure, spiritual, angelick. The angels carry about no cumbrous and sickly bodies : they are spirits : their substance is immaterial. Such are the souls of saints : and at the resurrection, their bodies will be made spiritual, like unto Christ's most glorious body. It was the opinion of some learned Jews, and other distinguished writers, that in the coming world, or at the resurrection, the bodies of the saints will be a "clothing of light, or a pure flame."* Agreeably to this idea, the prophet Daniel, foretelling the resurrection of the godly, says, "and they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament ; and they that turn many to righteousness, as the stars forever and ever." Our Saviour also, speaking of the saints after the final judgment, says, "Then shall the righteous shine as the sun, in the kingdom of their Father." The appearance of Christ on the mount of transfiguration, at the conversion of St. Paul, and to St. John, corresponds to the sentiment above stated. The angels, no doubt, are able to pass from place to place, and from world to world without any difficulty, and without that slow progressive motion

* See Whithy's Annot. I. Cor. xv. 54.

that is peculiar to bodies. 'The saints in heaven are like them.

As do the angels, so the saints enjoy the presence and love of God and of their Saviour, without intermission. Here they see as through a glass darkly ; but there they behold divine glory unveiled, and enjoy the full beams of divine light, the uninterrupted expressions of divine love. Their glorious Redeemer leads them to the heavenly mansions prepared for them, and makes them realize all his precious promises to his followers. In the presence of God is fullness of joy, and at his right hand are pleasures forevermore. In this blessed condition they serve God without weariness, and enjoy glory, honour, immortality, and eternal life. They know that their probation is ended, that their state is fixed, and that endless duration is an essential ingredient in the infinite blessedness of the heavenly world. Like the angels, they are light, and life, and love ; they are all activity and zeal, and they cease not, day nor night, to offer praise, and obey the divine will. Their employment is continual, their service delightful, and their capacity, knowledge, and happiness are perpetually increasing. What a blessed and glorious rest !

Application is pertinent, and may be reasonably expected, to the character and state of the excellent woman, whose funeral rites we are now performing. We have ample reason to believe she was a sincere christian ; that she died in the faith, fear, love, and favour of God in Christ Jesus ; and that she has entered into that rest and blessedness of which we have been speaking.

Long acquaintance and uninterrupted friendship may imperceptibly incline the speaker to partiality; but his resolutions are opposed to excess of eulogy. Distinguished worth ought to be noticed: eminent examples of piety and goodness ought to be held up for imitation.

I have witnessed in Mrs. ADAMS a character amiable and interesting, respectable and christian, in days of prosperity and adversity, in scenes of joy and sorrow. She was possessed of superior powers of mind, which, cultivated as they were by education and rational exercise, rendered her conversation intelligent and entertaining, and her religious opinions enlightened and useful. Very few of her sex exceeded her in judicious and energetick attention to the needful business of domestick life. By her industry and economy she contributed largely, not merely to the handsome support of her household, but to the benefit of this society, in that she enabled their pastor to attend more exclusively to the work of the ministry. Many daughters have done worthily, but she excelled. Her natural vivacity and fortitude, under the influence of religious principle, contributed highly to the comfort of her husband and family, whose happiness was always near her heart, and rendered her extensively a blessing. Her active benevolence, kind attentions to the sick and afflicted, and seasonable charities to the poor and destitute, have embalmed her memory, especially among this people. There were observable in her a warmth of heart, a frankness of disposition, a quickness of sensibility, an independence of mind, and a generosity of soul, happily com-

bined, which gave excellence, elevation, and dignity to her character.

As Mrs. ADAMS advanced in years she evidently made progress in grace and holiness. Mercies and afflictions were religiously noticed, and appeared to be sanctified to her. Scarcely a person of her standing in life could see more inducements to live longer, or feel more tender ties to objects of time, than presented to her view and existed in her heart. But her faith overcame the world, which she resigned with pious sensibility and exemplary cheerfulness, at the command of God ; for her choicest treasure and her heart were in heaven. Long and distressing sickness was appointed to her. I know not that I have ever seen the person who has appeared to me to endure both longer and severer bodily pain and anguish. But her will was submissive to the will of God ; and a steady hope in divine mercy, through the merits and atonement of Christ, supported her to the last, and, brightening as death approached, increased her desire to depart and be with Christ. Now she rests from her labours, and her works follow her. We rejoice and praise God in the belief of her blessedness.

With these things let the bereaved comfort themselves and one another. Yes, my dear and respected brother, your consolation now from the desire of your eyes, and the wife of your youth, consists, in the recollection of what she was, and the belief of what she is. But this is great and precious consolation. It is the consolation of religion, of God, for which you will not cease to be thankful, while you mourn your irreparable loss. As hitherto, so in future, the grace of

God will be sufficient for you. Now take to yourself, my brother, the consolations and advice you have often administered to others. Apply the promises, to which you have many a time directed the attention of mourners. You will now endeavour to illustrate and recommend, by your own example, the truth and excellence of the religion you have long preached. Your children, while they rise up and call their mother blessed, will not cease to honour and comfort their father. Your sympathizing people will accompany and pray for you. Your affectionate brethren in the ministry will not forget nor forsake you. But above and more than all, God will be with you, while you are with him. By his sensible presence and love, he will cause you to rejoice in tribulation, and glorify him in the fires of affliction.

The children of the deceased share in our sympathy and prayers. You need not be informed that you have been favoured with an affectionate, careful, pious mother. You will revere her memory, treasure up her counsels, imitate her virtues, and so be followers of those who through faith and patience are inheriting the promises. If her pure spirit be permitted to look down on human affairs, on the dear objects of her love here, let her see in you no dispositions nor practice, that can displease or offend, but such only as lead to her society and blessedness.

We mourn with the aged and venerable mother of the deceased.* How fondly and often have you said in your heart, ‘This same shall still comfort me;—she shall still support my tottering steps by filial re-

* MRS. ANNE STONE, now aged eighty-seven—relict of the Hon. JOSIAH STONE, of Framingham.

spect and duteous attention ;—and when death shall approach to end my pilgrimage on earth, my dear daughter shall speak to me words of consolation, tenderly close my eyes, and receive my blessing. But, alas ! God has destroyed my hope ;—she is gone, and I am left more than ever solitary and grieved ! With sorrow my grey hairs will descend to the grave !’ But, Madam, on a little reflection, your faith and piety will be called into exercise. You will say, “The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away, and blessed be the name of the Lord.” Would you recal her to earthly labours and sorrows ? Would you question the perfection of the divine procedure ? Far be this from your heart. You will say with our Lord, in extreme temptation, “Father, not my will, but thine be done ;” and with David, bereaved of a beloved child, Now she is gone, wherefore should I fast ? she cannot return to me, but I must go to her. To divine things, and the blessedness of the saints, you will direct the first and the most ardent aspirations of your soul. Neither an early nor a late death determines real character, nor evinces either love or displeasure from God. You will, I trust, stand waiting for the coming of your Lord ; and when he shall call, may you die in peace, and enter into that glorious rest that remaineth for the people of God.

The brothers of the deceased, will accept our condolence. We are not insensible to the heavy loss you sustain by the death of your only sister. May divine comforts be abundantly granted to you. And we hope and trust you will religiously regard the admonition of this event. The language of it is, “Be

ye also ready." If you and your families will exercise the faith and repentance of the deceased, and, like her, practise the religion of Christ, you will again be blessed with her society, and rejoice with her in glory forever.

It is a natural remark, from our text, and is worthy of thought and use, that the best christians must submit to death. Yes, christians, the tenderest bonds which now unite and warm your hearts, must be dissolved, except those of religion; and you must go, your body to the dust, and your spirit to God, who gave it. Death is no respecter of persons. You know neither the time nor the manner of your exit. Future blessedness, and the present hope of enjoying it, do not destroy the solemnity of dying. It is a scene of inexpressible interest;—a scene to which we should continually have reference. What strong faith, clear evidence, lively hope, conscious sincerity and faithfulness you will then need! Be zealous, then, now to secure those graces and supports, that when the cry of the bridegroom shall be made, you may be prepared to meet and join his holy train.

The unbelieving and wicked too must die. Want of preparation is so far from exemption, that it adds sevenfold greater terrors to the king of terrors. Where can we look for help, when heart and flesh shall fail? to what refuge can we fly for safety? If we be destitute of pure religion, if we be unreconciled and unlike to God, when the evil days of trouble, of old age, and of death shall come upon us. Be it our concern, then, to believe and obey the gospel of Jesus Christ, to be interested in his merits, and to be meet for the inheritance of the saints in light.

Being thus furnished, we may go on our way rejoicing, though sickness and death invade us ; “ for we know that, if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.” Possessing the character of those who die in the Lord, we shall forever participate in their blessedness, through the complete redemption there is in Jesus Christ. Amen.

